



Write NOLS History in the style of Kate Dernocoeur and include all NOLS Presidents

Into the Winds

Sixty Years of Leadership at NOLS

The First National Outdoor Leadership Course: 1965

The wind scours the surface of Sinks Canyon with a relentless energy, as timeless and fierce as the vision that birthed the National Outdoor Leadership School in 1965. In that year, **Paul Petzoldt** - mountaineer, maverick, and master storyteller - invited a daring band of strangers into the wilds of Wyoming. His dream: teach them not only how to survive, but how to thrive, and how to lead courageously and responsibly among stones, storms, and stars. In his hands, NOLS became more than a school - it was an expedition into the wild heart of leadership.^{[8][2][1]}

Foundations and Innovations: 1965–1970

Petzoldt's legendary reputation preceded him - he ascended the Grand Teton at age 16, survived countless adventures, and shaped NOLS's educational philosophy with equal parts skill and integrity. The intimate setting of the first facility, a small cabin in Sinks Canyon, hosted young men determined to learn not only outdoor skills but also the nuances of group leadership, risk management, and personal responsibility. Petzoldt, backed by local visionaries Ed Breece, Jack Nicholas, and William Erickson, led the school through tricky financial straits and the challenge of inventing gear from scratch using Salvation Army donations.^{[2][8]}

Women joined NOLS expeditions in 1966 as students, pushing the circle wider. But perhaps one of NOLS's greatest unsung heroes was **Thelma Young** - not an instructor, but an expert seamstress hired to make equipment and clothing, including innovative tents,

the Thelma Fly, wind pants (now a NOLS classic), wind shirts, and sleeping bags that formed the technical backbone of NOLS's adventures. Her work set standards for gear and defined a culture of problem-solving through creativity.^{[8][2]}

Winds of Change: Thirty Days to Survival

In 1968, NOLS was thrust into the national spotlight by the NBC Alcoa Hour broadcast, "Thirty Days to Survival," which documented a NOLS course venturing across Wyoming's Wind River Range. This exposure fueled explosive growth: by 1969, enrollment swelled from 250 students to more than 750 in 1970. As the school entered the 1970s, its reputation as a crucible for outdoor leadership, risk management and innovation was staked firmly in the public consciousness.^{[3][2]}

Navigating Turbulence: Hamren, Simer and Ratz

The leadership torch passed from **Paul Petzoldt** to **John Hamren** in 1975, who ushered NOLS through a transitional phase with steadiness and calm. At the end of 1975, **Peter Simer** became Executive Director. Simer's stewardship, resourcefulness, and advocacy rescued NOLS from financial peril and embedded a culture of scholarship, adventure and outreach. Simer navigated storms - both fiscal and literal - while expanding NOLS's national profile.^[5]

In 1984, **Jim Ratz** became Executive Director (President), carrying NOLS into a decade of growth and innovation. Ratz was instrumental in founding the Leave No Trace 501(c)3 non-profit corporation as a collaboration between numerous federal agencies and NOLS. Ratz advanced risk management, and set up critical NOLS satellite programs; his tenure left a legacy of environmental stewardship and alumni connection.^{[9][10][3]}

Expansion and Excellence: John Gans and Institutional Growth

A seasoned NOLS field instructor and head of NOLS Alaska, **John Gans** took the helm in 1995, leading two revolutionary decades of expansion: international classrooms stretched from Alaska to Africa, new partnerships emerged, and NOLS matured into a multifaceted leader in outdoor education. Gans had the vision to pursue and close the acquisition of the

Wilderness Medicine Institute (WMI), which became an integral part of NOLS. This era saw the launch of global risk management, and an intensified commitment to diversity. Gans's wisdom - listening deeply, leading inclusively - became central to the school's growth and reputation.^[4]

During this period, groundbreaking educators shaped the field. **Melissa Gray**, NOLS instructor and visionary and co-founder of WMI, integrated rigorous emergency medical training and field-tested protocols into NOLS curricula. Gray's leadership in wilderness medicine transformed NOLS into a national authority in Wilderness Medicine, training over 20,000 students in 2025 alone.^[11]

Breaking Barriers: Terri Watson and New Directions

After John Gans retired in 2020 following 25 years of service, Terri Watson became NOLS's first female president. Watson's presidency coincided with onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing financial and organizational upheaval to the school.

Watson made it a priority to ramp up the school's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Although many welcomed these efforts, NOLS Self-Assembly – a group of alumni, current and former faculty and staff, as well as former NOLS Advisory Council Members and Trustees – voiced concern that a poorly implemented DEI initiative had caused NOLS to lose sight of its mission and stray from the practice of Expedition Behavior.^{[18][19][20]}

Amid ongoing debates over DEI and significant financial pressures, Watson's steady leadership enabled NOLS to remain stable and sustain its operations through a challenging period for outdoor education organizations.^[21]

Looking Forward: Sandy Colhoun's Era

After serving as interim President since March 2023, in October 2023, **Sandy Colhoun** became the latest NOLS president and the first not to reside in Lander. A Wind River Mountaineering alumnus, Colhoun brought a commitment to humility, fundraising

expertise, and a vision for ongoing growth. Under his leadership, NOLS faces global challenges. Colhoun, in the spirit of “expedition behavior,” fosters teamwork and resilience as the world navigates new environmental and societal terrain.^{[6][11]}

Faces and Voices: Diversity and Influence

Dernocoeur’s narrative always intertwines the institutional with the personal. The NOLS story includes crucial figures like **Joanne Hurley**, the first woman to serve as Board Chair, and **Melissa Gray** as WMI’s co-founder, whose impact reverberates through every student who learns to respond in an emergency. **Thelma Young**, as seamstress and gear innovator, revolutionized the tools of wilderness travel for NOLS’s fledgling expeditions. Each person shaped NOLS’s legacy not just through leadership, but through vision and action.

Presidents of NOLS: 1965–2025

- Paul Petzoldt (1965–1975)^{[3][5]}
- John Hamren (mid 1975)
- Peter Simer (Dec 1975–1983)^[5]
- Jim Ratz (1984–1995)^{[10][9][3]}
- John Gans (1995–2019)^[4]
- Terri Watson (2020–2023)^[7]
- Sandy Colhoun (2023–present)^[6]

Each carried the torch forward with distinct style and conviction, ensuring that the school thrived through adversity, adaptation, and change.

Living the Lesson

Today, NOLS operates across six continents, teaching in deserts, rivers, mountains, and conference rooms. Its greatest lesson is resilience - tested by the challenges of gear,

terrain, weather, and wilderness, but always renewed through the vision of its leaders and alumni.

In the spirit of Kate Dernocoeur’s prose, the legacy of NOLS is written through wilderness adventure, institutional courage, and the hearts of those who dared to lead. With each new president and every innovative mind, the ever-unfolding trail promises adventure, stewardship, and leadership in the world’s wild places—no matter what the next horizon brings.^{[1][11][2][4][6]}

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Disclaimer: Perplexity, like every other AI Bot, is prone to invent details, leave out relevant facts and can get the sequence of actual events mixed up. Perplexity’s first pass at NOLS Presidents History included a person who had never taken a NOLS course inserted as a NOLS President, the sequence of actual Presidents out of order, the Alcoa Hour being broadcast on the wrong year, etc. Our feedback loop was to point out these mistakes and have Perplexity update its essay. Similar to labeling “Gluten Free” bread, our intent was to make this NOLS Presidents History “AI Hallucination Free”, and we made edits accordingly.

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